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Pope Francis, seated in a wheelchair leans his hand toward a couple, where a man is kneeling

Pope Francis offers his blessing as a man kneels to propose marriage to his girlfriend after the pope's weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican May 3, 2023. (CNS photos/Vatican Media)

Cindy Wooden

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The strong roots of faith and community helped the people of Hungary resist and survive Nazi occupation and communism, Pope Francis said, and the people must draw on those roots today to resist the more subtle threats of consumerism and individualism.

At his weekly general audience May 3, the pope reflected on his visit April 28-30 to Budapest, Hungary.

But he also used his main talk as an opportunity to wish a happy 92nd birthday to his friend, Edith Bruck, a Hungarian-born writer and Holocaust survivor now living in Rome.

Fascism and the Nazi occupation of Hungary during World War II led to "the tragic deportation of a large Jewish population" and the deaths of some 400,000 of them, the pope said. "But in that atrocious genocide, many distinguished themselves by their resistance and their ability to protect the victims; and this was possible because the roots of living together were firm."

"In Rome we have a great Hungarian poet who went through all of these trials and tells young people about the importance of defending an ideal so as not to be conquered by persecution and discouragement," the pope said. "This poet turns 92 years old today. Best wishes, Edith!"

Although Nazism and communism have been defeated, the pope said, "freedom is under threat" in many parts of the world today but with "kid gloves."

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The culprit, he said, is "a consumerism that anesthetizes," making people comfortable "with a little material well-being" so they forget the struggles of the past and how important it was to defend their faith and culture.

"This is a problem throughout Europe, where dedicating oneself to others, feeling community, the beauty of dreaming together and creating large families are in crisis. The whole of Europe is in crisis," he said. "So let us reflect on the importance of preserving roots, because only by going deep will the branches grow upward and bear fruit."

Francis urged people to ask themselves: "What are the most important roots in my life? Do I remember them, do I take care of them?"

Budapest, on the Danube River, also is a city of bridges, he said. And while visiting the city he wanted to emphasize "the importance of building bridges of peace between different peoples. This is, in particular, the vocation of Europe, which is called, as a bridge of peace, to include differences and to welcome those who knock on its doors."

"In this sense, the humanitarian bridge created for so many refugees from neighboring Ukraine, whom I was able to meet while also admiring the great network of charity of the Hungarian church, is beautiful," the pope said.

"Build bridges," he told people, "bridges of harmony, bridges of unity."